

LOUISA GAGLIARDI

Image material: provided
Interview and text by Reilly Davidson



Louisa Gagliardi's images, emerging from elementary sketches, digital remixes, Photoshop, and applied glosses, resound with a striking presentness. Through material exploration, she expresses a being-in-the-world that aligns with the present day integration of virtuality into physicality. This bizarre digital filtration system, where people become aggregates of technological interfaces, is the terrain in which Gagliardi composes her pictures. These works expertly encode the time and place of the artist's production.

Gagliardi's mode of rendering transmutes the immediacy of a brush on canvas to the inherent distance between user and networks beyond the screen. A mouse becomes the chief driver of forms – under her direction, old tech is substituted for a new one. She sandwiches digital procedures between traditional ones, initiating each image with a grouping of sketches, painting over her digitally rendered “meat” with gels, acrylics, and nail polish. Her finishing techniques produce luster that reverberates back toward the viewer. This glossy sheen also enforces the idea of “moving through” a painting, as the gel surfaces only catch light from specific angles. This procedure also bolsters a materiality that further reinforces these objects as artworks. Gagliardi contends with inherited textural indexes, her lacquers replacing traditional oils and tempera.

This “terminally online” culture and its ever-expanding set of conditions offers a basis for Gagliardi to respond to. As a result, her visual world is inextricably linked to digital technologies. Insofar as she pursues contemporary touchstones, her impressive body of work invokes a range of historical precedents, borrowing elements from Italian futurism and maintaining a surrealist appetite for the dreamworld. Threads of Ivo Pannaggi's industrial language are woven between Kay Sage's barren frontiers and Remedios Varo's opaque narratives. Gagliardi encapsulates the present age of surveillance and spectacle while nodding to the conceits of Renaissance idealism. She refers to the impossible postures and proportions of Sandro Botticelli's subjects; her more populated, “readable” scenes recall those of Giotto.

A host of sculptural objects have also emerged from Gagliardi's mindscape. Her proclivity for illusion manifests itself in strange objects, the artist impressing her signature forms onto the surfaces of polyester daybeds and crafted aluminum. In *Permission* (2021) the viewer encounters a Flat Stanley-like figure sat beyond a wall-bound dog. Chains and candles decorate the scene to nebulous effect. These objects strain for autonomy, just the same as her painted figures do. The situation at hand thus becomes one in which the fracture between dimensions unlocks a fundamental question of presence.

In her monumental presentation for the 2022 edition of Art Basel Unlimited, Gagliardi stages a scene that is relatively depopulated. There are two fully clarified figures while the rest appear in suggestion, composed of

silver chroma or materialized as fragments in scattered glassware. Throughout the artist's practice, exorbitant impulses manifest in the shapes of lavish dinner spreads and heeled footwear. However, this is the deflation after the party. Salt has been spilled and cherries are strewn about. *Tête-à-tête* inherently sports the cold aestheticism of digital rendering, but ultimately bolsters Gagliardi's penchant for theatrics. Her narratives are cultivated from floating signifiers cast into the terrain of perception. Isabelle Graw proffers this sentiment, writing that “painting's signs can be read as traces of the producing person,” and are submitted to the viewer's appraisal.

Under the Breath (2021) is energetically similar to *Tête-à-tête*, though it is mired in an unsettling green palette. Here, a hazy roundtable of green figures is cloaked in an ominous mist, its seated occupants apparently drowning in the milky haze. Pigeons decorate the scene, bearing witness to whatever strange communion takes place around the central table. A portentous exchange of hands stands out here, with cuticles and knuckles standing out in particular. Gagliardi regularly meddles in the act of gesticulation, her interest trained on the semiotics of hands. The sheen and particularity of *Palm Reader's* (2019) nail beds and *Blood moon's* (2020) defined palm creases represent Gagliardi's fascination with the expressibility of the subject.

It should be understood that these characters rarely correspond to recognizable individuals, operating instead as avatars ripe for the viewer's mediation. Pierre Klossowski dutifully traces this situation, writing that “the obsessions of the artist never coincide with the joy or anguish of the spectator.” They are sites for projection, where slippages between real encounters and imagined ones induce perceptual chaos. In *Refill* (2020), a shadowy protagonist's eyes release lambent tears into twin martini glasses. *Aphrodisiac* (2020), too, sees a forlorn woman illuminated by an artificial glow akin to the one transmitted by computer screen. Her tearless visage is eclipsed by stemware containing translucent liquid and a sunken cherry. Similarly alienated figures recur throughout her image-worlds, as she concerns herself with the contours of melancholy. Head in hands, the figure in *Reflecting* (2021) toils in this somber dimension, her inscrutable expression cast into a table-pond composite.

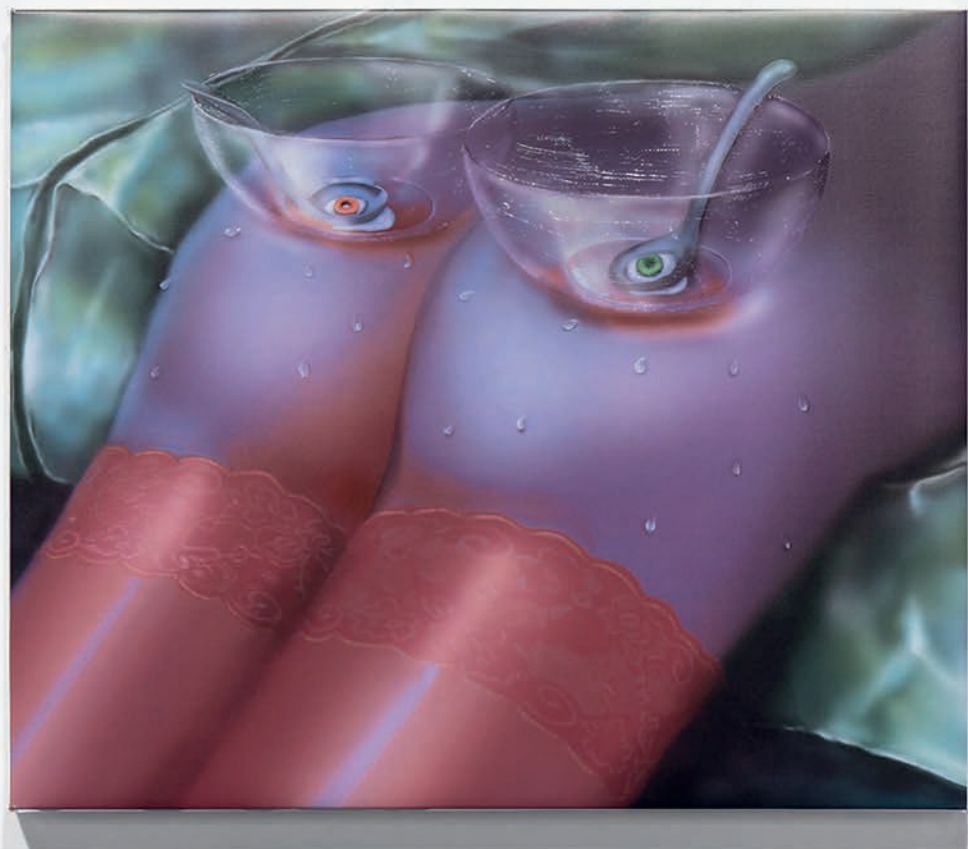
She has come to regard her bodies as landscapes in more recent years, zooming out from her formerly cropped subjects. Her subjects are increasingly entangled with anomalous surroundings, their subjectivities dwindling in the process. Upon first glance, *Luncheon on the Grass* (2022) is a warped vision of cows out to pasture. The animals are surrounded by a swirling lawn similar to Alex Katz's recent landscapes. The suggestion of texture in the original print is met with Gagliardi's application of gel medium, producing a remarkable sense of depth and underscoring the dynamism of her subjects. With a discerning gaze, it becomes clear that human shapes define the cow spots. *Daily Jam* (2019) alternatively proposes a scenario in which a glob of jelly

with legs, arms, and a rudimentary face rests against a perfect slice of white bread.

According to Gagliardi, these scenes can be understood as “midpoints,” or junctures lodged between climaxes. Whether moments of transition or repose, the artist's interludes activate their own provocations. Negotiating with ambivalence sidesteps the trappings of melodrama and produces a sense of ongoingness. Meanwhile, the interplay of light and dark in these images draw from Baroque formalism, generating chiaroscuro undulations through her interface. This is precisely what drives the artist's oeuvre. Gagliardi pushes the viewer to the brink of perturbation, while offering snip-pets of erotics and glamour. She expertly cultivates a tension between repulsion and desire. The dynamism of this effect alongside specific formal modalities compel the audience to actually spend time with the work, to pursue its schematics and embrace surreality. Even the perky bum in *Breakfast in Bed* (2019) projects strangeness, its pale skin tone verging on lavender. Sat atop each cheek is a bowl and spoon, punctuated by one eye – orange to the left, green on the right. The language here falls in line with Dalí's anatomical deviations, the body estranged from realism.

In the essay “The Knowledge of Painting: Notes on Thinking and Subject Like Pictures,” Graw dutifully breaks down the problematics of painting's myriad definitions throughout time. At one juncture she proposes that “painting has never been pure,” in fact, it should be understood as “something specific that has nonetheless undergone drastic despecification.” The latter sentiment is presented after Graw proposes that “we conceive painting not as a medium but rather as a type of sign production that's experienced as highly personalized.” It is within this framework that one can begin to appreciate the material inquiries set forth in Gagliardi's pluralized universe.

Gagliardi applies her skills in illustration and Photoshop to provoke the boundaries of her medium. Through the translation from digital to printed image, the object graduates into a state of “aliveness,” as its tactility induces tangible presence. PVC surfaces become receptacles for technological reorder, followed by the deployment of limited brushwork to the flat planes. She produces these disordered imaginal sites, broaching the tech-wise post-medium condition, while exploring a deeply human set of concerns. Reflexivity and fantasy seep into the artist's synthetic universe. Working along the lines established by Graw, Gagliardi incorporates the notion that “painting is a form of production of signs that is experienced as a highly personalized semiotic activity.” Gagliardi's self-awareness and understanding of her contribution within this framework facilitates a hybridized mode of production, one that connects dots from history with the conditions of today. While the future seems to be tripping over itself in an exponential race toward new horizons, Gagliardi sets out to concretize this particular moment.

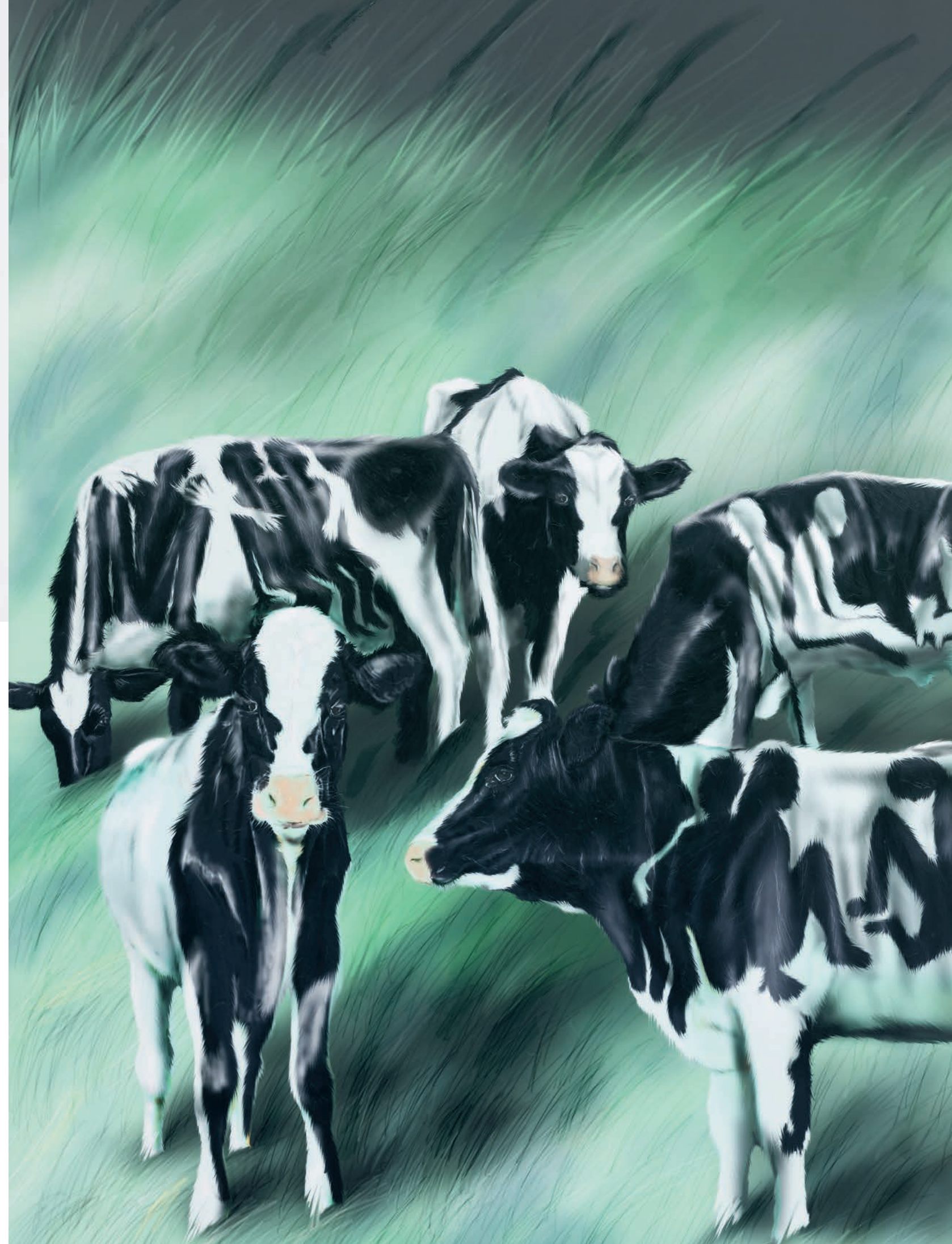


This page

Breakfast in Bed, 2019
Gel medium, ink on PVC
50 x 60 cm
Courtesy of the artist and
Rodolphe Janssen

Right page

Luncheon on the Grass, 2022
Gel medium, ink on PVC
180 x 130 cm
Courtesy of the artist and
Dawid Radziszewski



Next double page

Palm Reader, 2019
Gel medium, ink on PVC
140 x 215 cm
Courtesy of the artist and
Rodolphe Janssen





Left page

Reflecting, 2021
Gel medium, ink on PVC
180 x 115 cm
Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Eva
Presenhuber

Right page

Bedtime Daybed, 2023
Ink on Polyester
10 x 200 x 90 cm
Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Eva
Presenhuber





This double page

Tête-à-Tête, 2022
Nail polish, gel medium on PVC
370 x 1100 cm
Courtesy of the artist, Rodolphe
Janssen, Galerie Eva Presenhuber,
Dawid Radziszewski